
Transgender Native Americans

Transgendered Native Americans are frequently referenced as nearby, non-European models of both transgenderism and homosexuality. Unfortunately a great many erroneous suppositions are circulating with regard to transgendered Native Americans, and recent explications by [gay](#) historians serve to obscure the more important elements of gender in order to make a gay political point. This article is intended to briefly correct some of the common misunderstandings, not to be a complete or definitive statement on transgendered Native Americans.

The term 'berdache' was formerly used by white people in reference to Native Americans born male who were living as women. The term comes from the Arabic by way of the French, it's original meaning is 'slave boy' or 'catamite'. As such it conveys European ignorance of and contempt for transgendered Native Americans, and its use is considered insulting and erroneous by Native Americans. Unfortunately, modern transgendered Native Americans are at a distinct disadvantage, as white domination has eroded traditional tolerance and respect for transgendered Native Americans, as Native Americans, under economic, political, cultural, religious, and military domination by white people, worked to shed those customs which brought ridicule and punishment upon them by the white conquerors. Kachina clowns, transgendered people, contraries, and other people the white men found bizarre were suppressed, and many modern Native Americans are largely unaware of the former acceptance and respect given them.

All parties concerned agree that 'berdache' should be dropped, and when possible, replaced by the appropriate term for the particular tribe under discussion. The term 'two-spirited', however, is enjoying a vogue in certain circles as a generic replacement for 'berdache'. It is not by any means accepted by all transgendered Native Americans, for various reasons. Therefore this article will refer to 'transgendered Native Americans' as the term least likely to give offense and most likely to be understood.

Objections to the term 'two-spirited' illuminate many of the dilemmas and traditions facing transgendered Native Americans. First, 'two-spirited' is used to mean 'queer', that is to say, it is used to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Native Americans. As such, it reflects white concepts of gender and orientation, for in traditional societies, such people were integrated into the tribe. They were not 'two-spirited', but true spirited, that is to say, they abided by the principle of dreaming themselves into existence, and their single minded devotion to their visions was integrated and whole, not divided and torn, as implied by the term 'two-spirited'. In some places, the word 'two-spirited' is an insult applied to halfbreeds, or Indians who have 'sold out' and adopted white ways. As such, it defines a person who is torn from his ancestral ways, and as such, it may sometimes be an apt description of transgendered people whose tribes do not understand and accept them, but it serves only to emphasize the alienation of the transgendered person rather than to tie him to older, wiser concepts.

Other critics object to the term 'two-spirited' being applied to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who are not gender variant. Transgenderism among Native tribes was very much a

phenomenon of gender, not orientation. Orientation, as modern white people understand it, was not known among the tribes before the white men. Intimate relationships were dictated by one's gender role, not one's affectional preference--though of course there were always individuals who varied from those standards, and ways of sublimating homosexuality through socially accepted rituals. One such ritual was blood brotherhood, in which two men mingled their blood and were sworn to be always loyal to one another, to rescue one another when in danger, and to support one another in undertaking challenges. It was often observed that men loved their blood brothers more than their biological brothers or even their wives, and this was considered appropriate, normal, and manly; the homoerotic interpretation of such intense intimate relationships was not discussed.

Another important objection to the term 'two-spirited', is that the creation of a pseudo- Indian terms implies that transgenderism was a universal phenomenon among the tribes, when it was not. Approximately one third of North American tribes have been documented as having visible transgendered customs, which means it was far from a universal phenomenon. Further, it completely ignores Native Americans of Central and South American, about whom little is known to English-speakers, as well as non-Indian Native Americans, such as the Inuit of the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions.

It is important to clarify the arena of transgendered discussion: most, though not all, of the tribes exhibiting transgenderism were located in the Canadian and American West, especially the Plains Peoples and the Pueblo Peoples. Plains images dominate thinking about Native Americans, and it is important to understand that the following discussion does not apply to Woodland Tribes east of the Mississippi, the northern reaches of Canada and Alaska, and numerous other places.

Plains culture was extremely free, in that Plains Peoples were generally prosperous enough that very small units could support themselves, coming together in large communities only for Sundance and winter camp. Thus idiosyncrasities in individuals were much more easily tolerated as they didn't constantly rub elbows with other people who might object. If a Plains person didn't like his neighbor, he could always pack his tipi and leave. Pueblo Peoples, being agrarian, had much more tight knit, ritualistic, and formal organizations and traditions, as a result of which transgendered behavior was carefully channeled in socially approved ways, as compared to transgendered Plains People who were free to express themselves pretty much however they liked -- within certain limits.

Without going into specific detail for each tribe, the loose procedure for detecting and raising a transgendered child was notice his or her preference for the tools and duties typical of men or women. The tribes had sharply defined gender roles, which were enforced through shame, but they did not assign gender roles based on genitals, but rather upon the temperament and occupational preferences of the child. Thus young children were labeled 'boy' or 'girl' at any early age, long before sexual orientation would manifest. At this point it is important to point out that effeminacy is not a predictor of homosexuality in men, neither is masculinity a predictor of homosexuality in women. Only a small percentage of gay men and women fit the stereotype of 'sissy' or 'tomboy'. The vast majority have gender identity and appearance consonant with their genital gender. Thus one cannot assume that gender variant Native American children were also homosexual. On the contrary, most of them were probably heterosexual, and had to learn the sexual expression appropriate to their gender role. However, it is impossible to state with any positive proof what the orientation of gender variant Native American children actually was.

A child with a penis who was raised as a girl was considered a girl in all ways, and generally married a man. They were viewed as women by their tribes, and as such they were commonly the receptive partner for anal intercourse with their husbands. (Hence the French labeling them 'berdache' or catamites.) Plains People were polygamous, with men marrying several wives. Transgendered women were considered good wives and respected for their wisdom. Since a man generally had several genetic women as wives, he had plenty of children, and so the inability of a transgendered woman to conceive was not a problem. On the contrary, it meant that at least one wife at any given time (the transgendered wife) would not be preoccupied with pregnancy, nursing, or the care of small children, and could be depended upon to perform necessary household chores while the mothers tended their children. For this reason transgendered wives have sometimes been construed as 'servants' with low status.

Grandparents and other elders also helped in the raising of the children and performance of household duties, nonetheless, while the Plains People were prosperous, there was still a lot of work to be done. High mortality rates among the men (in some cases women outnumbered men by a two to one margin), made polygamy and an extended family necessary in order to provide for the support of widows and orphans. Transgendered wives were an important element of that system. This did not leave much time for pursuing one's personal affectional preferences, whatever they might be. Affairs did happen among the tribes, but most tales refer to young people eloping. Once saddled with the responsibilities of a family, presumably opportunities for hanky panky diminished.

Transgendered men also occurred among the tribes, but not as frequently, and are not as well documented. People born female, who preferred male activities, were raised as men and married women; they hunted, fought, and even became chiefs. While it seems apparent that their tribes were aware that a transgendered man's genitals differed from his gender role, it was irrelevant, and apparently not used against them by hostile persons. (Until white influence made itself felt.)

Among some of the Pueblo Peoples, tests were deliberately given to young children, such as placing a child, a bow, and a weaving shuttle within a hut, and setting it on fire. Whichever item the child grabbed as it ran out of the hut determined its gender role in the tribe. Among the Plains People, dreams were very important, and people were obliged to live up to their dreams to the best of their ability. Thus if a person of any age dreamed himself as the opposite sex, he would adopt that role. Sometimes transgendered people slid back and forth between roles, assuming male name and garb for hunting and fighting, but donning female garb and name for domestic chores. This seems to have been rare. Usually transgendered people stayed in one role or the other.

White reaction to transgendered people varied. Often they did not realize that the transgendered person was in fact transgendered. Probably the most famous of Native American transgendered person was He'Hwa, a Zuni. She was a notable craftswoman, and greatly admired by her people and by white people who knew her. She visited Washington, DC, where she demonstrated Native crafts and was wildly popular. Later, when it was discovered that she had male genitalia, her white supporters continued to refer to her as a woman, and to discount the significance of her discordant genitalia, in concordance with tribal custom. Modern gay historians, on the other hand, view this as evidence of homophobia so intense that white people could not accept that He'wha was a man married to a man. However, it seems clear that contemporary white people understood and respected He'wha on the same terms as her tribe

did; by contrast, modern gay authors are sufficiently ignorant of transgenderism and tribal customs that they give the greatest weight to genitals, when in fact in the cultural context genitalia were insignificant. It is not recorded if anybody asked He'wha what her sexual preference was, therefore it is impossible to impute an orientation to her, as the word 'orientation' is used in modern circumstances. Men in enforced male environments such as shipboard and prison engage in 'situational homosexuality', meaning sexual gratification with other men only because no females are available. Considering the firmness of gender roles in Pueblo culture, it is probable that a similar weight of circumstance dictated a functional orientation, as opposed to expression of affectional orientation.

Which begs the question, what is homosexuality? Is it the act of engaging in sex with a member of one's own gender? What is the 'own gender' of a transgendered person? A man, woman, or another transgendered person? Or is orientation determined by desires (which might never be acted on)? 'Orientation' is therefore a very slippery concept, loaded with emotional weight and impossible to define in a satisfactory way. Gender role, by contrast, is much more concrete, apparent and discernible. We can say with complete confidence that He'wha was a transgendered woman, but we don't know if she considered herself a man in a dress engaged in a gay relationship, or a woman with a minor bodily aberration, considerably overlooked by her husband, and therefore involved in a heterosexual relationship. Transgenderism blows apart the careful dichotomy of gay and straight, as well as the sexual apartheid of man and woman.

In truth, no one is an 'ism', or any other form of label. Each of us is a unique being, influenced by other people's perceptions. The Native Americans of the American and Canadian West enjoyed a personal liberty and self-actualization rarely experienced by white people, and as such, even Americans who have a reputation as rugged individualists, are still not able to conceive just how individualistic ordinary Indians were. Put in a context where all people were dreaming themselves into existence, transgenderism is one of many unique ways a personality might manifest itself. The Native mandate to live up to visions and dreams seems extraordinary to people who are accustomed to dismissing dreams as irrelevant fantasies and who enforce a homogenous lifestyle while at the same time lauding personal liberty. The fundamental perplexity of mainstream American life is, "To thine ownself be true, as long as you aren't too weird."

That is probably why the image of the transgendered Native American has such appeal: we all wish that we were free to be who we truly are, to be respected for our unique gifts, and to not have to battle to defend our vision of self against the force of convention.

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